

2003

## Grief counseling with children and adolescents

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Funke, Megan, "Grief counseling with children and adolescents" (2003). *Graduate Research Papers*. 703.  
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## Grief counseling with children and adolescents

### Abstract

There are many causes for the grief children and adolescents suffer in their lives. No matter what the cause, they will need someone to help them deal with their grief and develop the necessary coping skills to live a normal life. This paper discusses how school counselors can help children and adolescents learn to deal with their grief in a healthy manner and develop strong and lasting coping skills.

# GRIEF COUNSELING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

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A Research Paper

Presented to

The Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling,

and Postsecondary Education

University of Northern Iowa

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts OR Master of Arts in Education

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by

Megan Funke

December 2003

This Research Paper by: Megan Funke

Entitled: GRIEF COUNSELING WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts [or Master of Arts in Education].

8-26-03  
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Date Approved

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## Abstract

There are many causes for the grief children and adolescents suffer in their lives. No matter what the cause, they will need someone to help them deal with their grief and develop the necessary coping skills to live a normal life. This paper discusses how school counselors can help children and adolescents learn to deal with their grief in a healthy manner and develop strong and lasting coping skills.

Grief can be described as a natural human reaction. Archer (1999) stated that "it is a universal feature of human existence irrespective of culture, although the form and intensity its expression takes varies considerably" (p. 1). We normally think of it as the loss of a loved one through death, but a broader, similar reaction can occur when a close relationship ends, or when a person is forced to give up some aspect of life that was important (Archer, 1999). When children or adolescents suffer a loss, they need extra attention and guidance to work through the grief. The young individual is not able to understand what is happening or why it is happening to him or her. Things that before seemed very important might now seem trivial, and they may no longer have any interest in eating or dressing. Young people who have lost someone or something important in their lives can think of nothing but their loss. Any effort to try to help them cope seems fruitless as they continue to dwell on the loss.

Children and adolescents will likely suffer a loss at some point in their lives. Due to their age and developmental levels, they do not have the adequate coping skills to work through the grief alone. According to Bouvard & Gladu (1998), "recovery from grief is a voyage in the dark; meandering detours, thickets, dead ends, cul-de-sacs, and occasional clearings" (p. 14). Bouvard & Gladu also stated that "grief is not straight and narrow, nor is the road well-traveled, because it is different for each of us" (p. 14). Children and adolescents need someone to help them through this unbeaten path and work through the grief

that is getting in the way of or preventing learning. Counseling is necessary for these young people help them return to normal functioning both at school and at home. School counselors can help children and adolescents reach a point where they can learn, play, and adjust to life after loss.

When children and adolescents are consumed by grief, they are not able to focus or learn as well as they normally do (Smead, 2000). They may be overwhelmed by their feelings, and unable to think about or concentrate on anything other than their loss. Bertman (1999) stated that young people who are in pain need a safe place where they can be listened to, as well as learn to listen to themselves. Stroebe, Stroebe, & Hansson (1993) noted that counselors can help young people work through their grief, and added that they can help them come to terms with a loss through confronting and restructuring thoughts surrounding the loss.

Counselors are also needed to help children and adolescents work through a loss because not enough time is allowed for grieving. Americans tend to think about a loss as a single event, when typically it is not (Klass et. al., 1996). This author also noted that some people may not realize that attachments endure, and that some losses are so big and so painful that they never get to a place where grief has ended.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how children and adolescents experience the stages of grief and to discuss the important role school counselors

play in helping children and adolescents deal grief and loss. Because counselors understand how children's developmental level impact how they comprehend and respond to grief, they are able to teach them the coping skills necessary to move on after a loss. Specific interventions that counselors use to help children and adolescents deal with their grief are described.

### Definition of Grief

Grief is defined as a primarily emotional (affective) reaction to the loss of a loved one through death (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). According to Davidson & Doka (1999), while we often associate grief with death, any loss can cause grief reactions. For example, children and adolescents may grieve their parents' divorce or other losses of relationships. As Roos (2002) stated "there are multiple impacts, both symbolic and real, that coalesce to bring about a person's decompensation" (p. 159). According to Klass et. al., (1996) individuals grieve the loss as well as the circumstances surrounding the loss. If children or adolescents are confused or uncertain about their loss, it will prolong the grieving process.

### Working Through the Grieving Process

According to Wolfelt (2001), grief is a process rather than an emotion. There are many stages children and adolescents go through when they grieve, and as they work through these stages of the grieving process, they do it differently than adults do. Children have a limited capacity to tolerate emotional pain,



limited ability to verbalize their feelings, and are sensitive about behaving differently than their peers who are not experiencing a loss (Webb, 1993).

Individuals may go through the stages in very different ways, but Dr. Kubler-Ross (1991) stated that this is not due to the subjects' age, religious background, or nationality. At the same time, it is important to remember that the way children and adolescents respond to grief varies considerably, depending on the individual. Being aware and knowledgeable of the stages of grief will help adults in the school system, particularly counselors, help young persons deal with their grief. It is the duty of the school personnel to equip children with coping strategies that enable them to respond to the inevitable changes, disappointments, and losses that occur in their lives (Davidson and Doka, 1999).

### *Stages of Grief*

The stages of grief occur at different times throughout the grieving process, and the individuals may move between the different stages of grief as they progress. McEwen (2002) discussed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She described the stages in detail, but added that not everyone goes through all of the stages, and few move through the stages in the same order.

The first stage is denial and shock. The child or adolescent realizes the loss, but does not want to accept it as true. The next stage, anger, is directed at what is perceived as unfairness. Children and adolescents are angry about the loss

because they feel it is not right that they have lost a loved one. The next stage is bargaining, in which the person who has suffered the loss wants to exchange something for the loss. For example, children or adolescents might promise to be good forever in order to have the person or thing come back. Many children and adolescents feel guilty as they think back to things they did or did not do prior to the loss, which is why they “bargain” and promise to be good. When children and adolescents reach the depression stage, they feel a sense of great loss, experiencing mood fluctuations and feelings of isolation and withdrawal from others around them. These mood swings and feelings can negatively affect relationships with peers, teachers, and family members as the child or adolescent sets him or herself apart. When children and adolescents reach the loneliness stage, they feel lonely and afraid because they begin to realize the difference in their lives without the person or thing that is gone. One of the final stages of grief is acceptance, which is where children and adolescents accept and deal with the reality of the situation, even though they will not be happy about the loss. Finally, young people reach the last stage of grief, which is hope. As individuals begin to look ahead to the future and more good times, remembering will be less painful and they will be able to learn and play as they normally have.

As children and adolescents move through the stages of grief, they may feel abandoned, angry, sad, or guilty (McFarland & Tollerud, cited in Vernon, 1999). McFarland & Tollerud also stated that for most young people, these

feelings are confusing and disturbing. School counselors can help children and adolescents work through these feelings and stages of grief by normalizing the young person's feelings. A counselor might say, "I'm sure it's hard to lose your father. Some kids your age might be sad or angry at him for leaving, and it's okay to feel that way," (Bradley & Gould, cited in Vernon, 1999, p. 92). Helping children and adolescents express feelings will help counselors identify the stage of grief and use appropriate interventions to help them reduce the grief.

### Individual Counseling Interventions

Through individual counseling, "individuals who have lost a relationship – be it through separation, desertion, or particularly through death – become able to renew old and establish new relationships as his or her emotional focus moves again to life and, later, to the future" (Schoenberg, 1980, p. 259). Establishing a strong relationship and good rapport with an individual who is grieving will help him or her work through the difficult emotions. The relationship itself is therapeutic and can help ease the pain of the grieving individual.

When counseling children who are grieving, remember that the main role of the counselor is to "be there" for the individual. Offering physical and emotional support from the beginning will help the child or adolescent feel less alone and afraid, as well as help him or her begin the process of grieving.

The first and foremost action a counselor should take when a young person has suffered a loss is to let the child or adolescent know he or she is

available. Simply being in the physical presence of grieving children or adolescents will provide a sense of security and comfort. Adults are understanding and able to go to and be there for other adults, but a child or adolescent often does not have someone just for him or her. When a counselor goes to a student's home, the young person no longer feel as alone or strange with so much happening all around. The counselor can talk with children or adolescents about the loss, or might best support them simply by being present.

The next role of the counselor is to listen unconditionally. Regardless of what children and adolescents need to say or express, the counselor is the individual who devotes his or her entire attention to them. This also helps develop rapport and a strong bond.

Children and adolescents might feel different or abnormal regarding the way they react to the loss. Counselors can help them to understand the all people grieve in a different way. "Grief is individual, and cannot be measured or judged by anyone else" (Gale, 2002, p.4).

As children and adolescents begin to deal with the loss, counselors can help young people actualize it through talking about the facts surrounding their loss. Children or adolescents may pretend the loss did not happen because the pain and grief are unbearable. By coming to terms with the event surrounding the loss, the child or adolescent will make it real.

Counselors should also help children and adolescents discover their support systems, such as immediate family members, extended family, close friends and neighbors, religious or church family, staff at their school or a sibling's school, and the school counselor. Counselors can also teach those young people how to utilize that support system in order to deal more effectively with their feelings and emotions at different periods of time.

Finally, the counselor should stay in touch with the child or adolescent for some time following a loss (Gale, 2002). Gale added that maintaining some relationship and communication will help the child or adolescent continue to accept changes in his or her life following the loss. If the loss is temporary, as in the case of a parent who has gone to serve in the war, the counselor should follow up with the young person when the parent returns. Each situation will be different, and the counselor must attempt to be there at the necessary times for the child in the present as well as in the future.

### *Factors to Consider*

The development is important to consider in counseling. A counselor must understand the difference between interventions that are appropriate for younger children and those that are effective with adolescents. It is also important to know the individual personally because school-age children and adolescents are at different developmental levels within their own age group.

The circumstances or factors surrounding the loss will also be important points to consider. For example, if an adolescent has lost a sibling in a car accident, and he or she was in the car as well, there will likely be much more severe feelings of guilt, anger, or questioning than a situation in which an adolescent has lost his or her sibling after a long battle with cancer. Both situations are extremely painful, but the stages of grief and the grieving process will occur differently. Wolfelt (2001) stated that the intensity of grief over a loss will vary depending on the meaning of the loss to the individual. The adolescent who has lost a sibling will likely have a much more severe emotional reaction than if a great-grandparent, who he or she rarely saw, died at a very old age.

A child or adolescent's culture and religious background can also have a profound affect on his or her response to a loss. According to Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble (2002), knowledge of different cultures' spiritual and religious beliefs and practices helps counselors become more aware of diversity and therefore more effective and sensitive in cross-cultural encounters.

### *Specific Interventions to Help Reduce Grief*

Children and adolescents are developmentally not ready to deal with grief on their own. Therefore, they need a counselor to help them reduce the emotional pain. Many interventions used to help reduce grief are specific to one developmental level, but can be adapted for any age group. The following is a list of some specific strategies that will work with children, adolescents, or both.

These ideas are taken from Hoskins (2003) and Vernon (1999), and adapted specifically for grief and loss. Interventions by others are specifically noted.

- ◆ *Fill in the blanks.* Create sentences that are open ended to allow children and adolescents to fill them in with their own feelings, thoughts, or actions. An example sentence may be: *When I think about death I feel...*
- ◆ *Free writing, journals, poetry, letter writing.* The children and adolescents may choose one or all of the different types of writing to convey their feelings with regard to their loss. Free writing allows young people to write about their loss, or the different feelings they have had throughout this experience. Journaling could be a daily ritual to help express how they feel one day to the next. They could also write a poem about their feelings regarding loss, or could write a letter or poem to the person who is no longer with them.
- ◆ *Create a compact disk (c.d.)* (Schoen, cited in Vernon, 1999). Invite the child or adolescent to compile a compact disk of songs that were especially meaningful to the person who left or died or of songs he or she thinks this person would have liked.
- ◆ *Make a collage* (Vernon, 1997, cited in Vernon, 1999). Children and adolescents may collect pictures or small memorabilia that represent

the person who left or died and may use these materials to make a collage of memories.

- ◆ *Talk with other people who have experienced a similar loss.* Through talking with individuals about loss, children and adolescents realize that they are not the only ones who have felt this way. They will feel more normal and comfortable with their feelings, which will allow them to cope effectively.
- ◆ *Become part of new groups and relationships.* As children and adolescents become involved with new activities they will be more likely to move through their grief. They will also realize that life still goes on and new people and groups can be fun and satisfying.
- ◆ *Bibliotherapy* (Vernon, 1999). Reading literature or watching movies can help children and adolescents understand their feelings better. For example, children can relate to a story about a boy whose dog has died. They may realize that they are having feelings similar to those of the boy in the story, and will be able to express them more clearly.
- ◆ *Favorite memory discussion.* Invite children and adolescents to share their favorite memories of the person who left or died.
- ◆ *Family ritual discussion* (Hoskins, 2003). Talk with children or adolescents about rituals involving the person who is no longer with them. For example, if the family always decorated the Christmas tree



together, they might talk about what it is like to not have everyone there to help.

- ◆ *Saying Good-Bye* (Bradley & Gould, cited in Vernon, 1999). Ask children or adolescents if there is anything they would like to tell the person who is gone. It might be about a reward they received or simply that they miss the person.
- ◆ *Empty Chair Technique* (Thompson, 1996, cited in Vernon, 1999). Children or adolescents can speak to the empty chair as if it were someone who was in his or her life but has gone away.
- ◆ *Just "be"* (Gale, 2002). Simply be with the children and adolescents who have suffered a loss. No words or actions are necessary.
- ◆ *Play therapy*. This intervention uses toys and play as the primary form of communication. Children use toys, art supplies, games, and other play material to express themselves in their own way.
- ◆ *Create a memory book* (Hoskins, 2003). Invite children and adolescents to collect pictures or other memorabilia of the person who has left or died and put them together in a book.
- ◆ *Tell about the person (or animal/thing) and relationship*. Ask children and adolescents to talk about how they knew or were related to the loss, and what that person (or animal) was like.

- ◆ *Body drawings* (Hoskins, 2003). Invite children and adolescents to describe the feelings they have in each part of their bodies when they think about their loss. They may trace an outline of themselves (with the help of another individual) and write their feelings in their own body drawing.
- ◆ *Storytelling*. Clients tell or write a story about their loss. The story may be factual, fictional, or a combination of both.

### Group Counseling

Grief support groups in the school setting provide children and adolescents a safe, confidential, and supportive environment within which to share feelings, thoughts, and behaviors experienced while grieving a loss (Gale, 2002).

Counselors and group members help create experiences that are therapeutic, such as “inculcation of hope, development of understanding, and the experience of being loved” (Stroebe, Stroebe & Hansson, 1993, p. 412). Stroebe et. al. also stated that groups are cognitive restructuring systems and important social linkages where important relationships are developed, and provide peer support and acceptance for children and adolescents. According to Attig (1996), children and adolescents need others to encourage and support them as they cope with the challenges of dealing with grief. A group environment will provide the extra support and understanding they need to feel part of the world in general, as well as to feel that someone truly understands how they feel and what they are going

through. Relationships created in groups support those feelings, and are a very important part of resolution for these young individuals.

### *Group Formation*

There are a few important points to consider when forming a grief support group. The first is the make-up of the group; the potential students who may benefit and want to be involved in the group. Individual students should be chosen and interviewed to determine their desire to be involved and to discuss the basic outline and format of the group.

Group size is the next piece in forming a support group. Gale (2002) stated that a group of children or adolescents are better supported with a larger number of group members because they have the opportunity to interact with a variety of peers and benefit from a broader range of suggestions and support. According to McFarland & Tollerud (cited in Vernon, 1999), grief groups are especially beneficial when they are composed of children at different stages of the grief process. Gale (2002), noted that students who have been involved in groups in the past may repeat membership because as their skills grow, children and adolescents will be able to better support other new group members and make new groups a success.

With changing schedules and time restrictions, group sessions can be extremely difficult to plan in schools. Grief support groups for younger children may meet weekly for one or two 30-minute sessions. This time frame more

closely fits with regular instructional class periods and a child's average attention span.

### *Parent Permission*

The parent permission letter is an important piece in the whole grief support group experience for the child or adolescent. It not only establishes a home to school communication, but it may also open the door to parent-student communication about the loss (Gale, 2002). The parent permission letter should describe a little bit about the group and what it will entail. For example, telling parents that the group will give their children the opportunity to talk about grief and the accompanying feelings and will help them see that their children can benefit through the support group. Parents should also understand that the goal of the group is to provide a safe, confidential atmosphere in which their child is able to talk with others who have been through a similar experience. According to Gale, it is also important to make it known, that the counselor is available to parents at any time to discuss questions or concerns.

### *The School Counselor's Role as Facilitator*

The school counselor's role as facilitator of a grief support group changes from the beginning formation of the group to the end and final evaluations. The counselor begins by forming the group and planning the sessions and finishes with group and individual evaluations. According to Bergin (cited in Vernon, 1999), during the group process the counselor concentrates on promoting the

development of group interaction, establishing rapport among group members, leading the group progressively, and encouraging individual members' self-exploration and personal decision making. However, before beginning the group the counselor must be confident in his or her skills to lead the group successfully (Gale, 2002). Gale added that the counselor must also be sure that he or she is comfortable with his or her own feelings, beliefs, and experiences with death before beginning the group.

The counselor's role in leading the students is to encourage participation and sharing, but not to force them to do so. It is the counselor's goal to provide students with a safe, comfortable, understanding, and accepting atmosphere within which to share their pain. The counselor cannot give the students any magic words or take away their pain, but can give them a caring, concerned, supportive, non-judgmental listener. Vernon (1999) supported this comment by saying that counselors and adults must realize that children and adolescents cannot be protected from loss.

### *Group Counseling Sessions*

Smead (2000) outlined an eight-session group-counseling intervention for bereaved children designed to help children realize that others have experienced loss, to label and express feelings about the loss, to say good-bye to a deceased person, to understand that funerals are not to be feared, to understand the stages of grief, to understand the causes of death, and to express sympathy to a grieving

person. McFarland & Tollerud (cited in Vernon, 1999) added that the “tasks of the last phase of grief for children include consolidation of the child’s identity and resuming normal developmental tasks” (p. 240). Young people can help one another using the skills they have learned through their grief group sessions, and can be support for other children in the early phases of grief support groups. The support they offer to other children through the earlier phases of grief will benefit them as well in the later phases to integrate the loss they suffered and begin getting on with their lives.

Gale (2002) discussed using a process and group structure for adolescents with 8 to 10 sessions, similar to Smead’s 8-session model of group-counseling. The adolescent group format runs on a weekly schedule, but is open to allow more time per topic as needed. It is led by the counselor, and is specific to individuals who have suffered a loss because someone they love has died. Gale (2002) outlined the following adolescent grief group format that addressed death specifically, but could be modified for other types of loss.

*Week 1 – Organizational Meeting:* During this initial meeting, the counselor will introduce group members and review group goals and ground rules. He or she will then review the outline of topics but emphasize that anything may be discussed. Finally, the counselor will inform group members of the assignment for the next week; “Sharing the Event.”

*Week 2 – Sharing the Event:* Each group member is asked to share the facts of the death – who died, when, how it happened, associated feelings and reactions he or she experienced – as well as any other details he or she would like to share. The counselor will then link similar experiences and feelings among group members. It is important to leave time for closure and composure as this may be a very emotional and difficult session.

*Week 3 – The Grief Process:* The counselor will ask group members to share the grief feelings they have experienced including any physical symptoms of grief. Group members will then participate in a grief scale activity which includes a discussion of where were they and where are they now. It is important to emphasize that people do not go through stages in an orderly progression but that grief is individually unique. The counselor should tell the group that there is no timetable for grief, and members are not alone in their feelings. The goal of this session is not to move on in the grief process, but to allow individuals to share feelings and experiences while being accepted and listened to.

*Week 4 – The Funeral and Cemetery Visits:* The counselor will lead a discussion of members' reactions to the funeral service and visitation, cemetery visits and feelings about visiting the cemetery. Finally group members will discuss their feelings about returning to school after the death or funeral.

**Week 5 – Changing Family Structure:** Group members will talk about how their lives have changed in their families. These changes may include added or different responsibilities, financial hardships, moving, or changing schools. Relationships within the family may also be discussed.

**Week 6 – Family Rituals and Memories:** Group members will share happy, humorous, or treasured memories. The counselor should emphasize that although the person is gone, the memories will always be there.

**Week 7 – To Tell the Truth Questions:** The counselor will place random questions in an envelope, and group members will take turns drawing and answering these questions.

**Week 8 – The Letter:** Group members write a letter to the deceased to take care of any unfinished business, or to just let him or her know how they are doing.

**Week 9 – Closing Activity:** The counselor will lead a discussion of the group experience and how those who have experienced a loss can be of help to others.

Grief support groups for children in the lower primary grades as well as with adolescents may be similar to the format that was described. The most important factor to consider is the individual. “Rather than seeing others as merely cogs in the machinery, you can devote a brief period of time before and



after each meeting to initiate a more personal discussion with another group member” (Fujishin, 2001, p. 144). Showing a gentle and friendly interest in another person by simply asking questions about family, hobbies, sports, and so on will help group members connect with each other as well as with the group facilitator.

### Conclusion

School counselors play a major role in the lives of children and adolescents who have suffered a loss. They are there for individuals from the beginning feelings of denial and anger, until long after the person (or thing) has been gone and many of the strong emotions have subsided. Counselors help children and adolescents work through the feelings and emotions that come with the stages of grief, and help them throughout the grieving process.

Counselors also utilize a variety of methods in counseling young people who have suffered a loss. Grief support groups help children and adolescents realize that they are not alone and allow a deeper level of sharing and understanding for all group members. Individual counseling also benefits children and adolescents who have lost someone or something they love. These counseling sessions create a bond between the counselor and young person that, in and of itself, can be therapeutic to the child or adolescent.

The interventions counselors can use should be creative and specific to the individual or group, which helps the child or adolescent deal with his or her grief

and eventually be able to function more normally, even though the loss may continue to impact them in various ways.

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